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BEING AN I-WITNESS—MY LIFE AS A LESBIAN TEACHER

BARBARA DiBERNARD

When I began writing this essay I was “out” as a lesbian in my department, the English Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, although still not out to most of my students—and it had taken ten years to get to that place. As lesbians and gay men know, coming out is not a one-time activity, but an ongoing process. I have left this essay as I wrote it in 1990, with a short Afterword to bring it up to date.

A couple of years ago when someone would ask me if I was out at my job, I would say, “I think so.” I had signed a letter along with the other lesbian and gay professors in my department asking our colleagues to include lesbian and gay literature in the reading list of a new course we were designing. When the English Graduate Student Association and the Teaching Committee put together a panel on “Sexism, Racism, and Homophobia in the Classroom,” they asked me to speak on homophobia. A colleague who runs a first-year Foundations course asked me for speakers who could address gay and lesbian issues for his students. Once a colleague’s wife talked with me about her lesbian daughter. Obviously lots of folks “knew.”

Yet I still felt that people could easily ignore that aspect of my identity if they wanted to, and increasingly that felt uncomfortable for me. I felt very lonely as a lesbian teacher and an academic. I could talk to many colleagues about literature, about teaching, and about our profession, but I felt there was no one except one gay male colleague with whom I could talk about being a lesbian academic. I thought often about whether I should come out in class, I worried about putting on my vita my talk to the Gay and Lesbian Student Association at a nearby college, I wondered how my colleagues and family would react to my first article on lesbian studies, but I shared none of these worries with heterosexual colleagues. Eventually I realized I was also suppressing a great deal of anger that I “had to” expend so much time and energy on these concerns. What I felt from my colleagues was what Suzanne Pharr

has described as "an acceptance drawn from the politics of tolerance and compassion, not equality" (28). While people knew I was a lesbian and I experienced no overt discrimination, my life as a lesbian teacher remained largely invisible. But my inner discomfort had become so acute, a beginning gut knowledge of what "Silence = Death" means had become so strong, that in the last months I have begun being out to my colleagues more insistently. In doing so, I have asked them to acknowledge my experience as a *lesbian* academic.

Two years ago the student senate denied funding to a lesbian and gay student group and was upheld by the university administration. While this controversy went on, hateful and ignorant homophobic letters to the editor were the rule for weeks. I was surprised as I became increasingly depressed and angry, as I think of myself as quite resilient and having lots of resources. After all, I'm comfortable with my lesbian identity, I have a strong support network, I have job security. Part of my anger and depression was, I think, at how unaware and uninvolved even my most liberal colleagues were. Often when I mentioned the specifics of the case, otherwise aware colleagues had no idea what I was talking about, although the issue had been reported on the front page and the editorial page of the student newspaper almost daily. Therefore, I decided to talk about how I experienced this as a lesbian whenever I could. I wanted my colleagues to know that this mattered to me, that it was painful to me. I wanted them to know too that lesbian and gay students were suffering. I didn't want my pain to be invisible because it involved my lesbian self.

When I spoke on homophobia at the English Graduate Student Association's panel on "Sexism, Racism, and Homophobia in the Classroom," I publicly identified myself as a lesbian for the first time in the department. I spoke not only of the homophobia expressed by our students in the classroom, but also of the homophobia that teachers bring into the classroom, as evidenced by the near-invisibility of lesbian and gay writers *treated as* lesbians and gays in our curriculum. I felt that it was important to be out unequivocally, so that no one in the department could pretend that she or he does not have a lesbian colleague, so that when issues came up I could address them publicly out of the context of my own experience.

Since my Chair was at the session at which I came out, I felt I could, without any preamble, use my annual review with him as a time to discuss homophobia on campus, particularly the silencing and harassment which my lesbian students experience and share with me. I told him of the lesbian student who received three obscene phone calls the day she came out in class; of the lesbian student who heard no mention

of homosexuality in her sociology course; of the lesbian student who sat through a class in Abnormal Psychology in which other students pronounced lesbians and gay men "sick," "sinful," and "perverted," with no intervention from the instructor.

I hope that in telling my stories as a lesbian teacher and academic and in relating my lesbian students' stories I perform a function similar to what Margaret Atwood claims for the writer:

Come with me, the writer is saying to the reader. There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know. The writer is both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others. (348)

But telling is not enough; there must also be hearing, and beyond that, action. Although it has felt good and powerful to be out with my colleagues, to be an "I-witness" for myself and for my students, the atmosphere at the University of Nebraska seems at best a kind of liberal tolerance and at worst overt homophobia. While we have a non-discrimination policy which includes sexual orientation, no administrator on my campus has initiated a policy or action to make this a better environment for lesbians and gay men.¹ A group of concerned students, faculty, and staff who constituted themselves into a Homophobia Awareness Committee had to wait for over a year to be officially appointed as a committee, in spite of repeated requests to a vice-chancellor.

When I have told members of my own department about the homophobia experienced by lesbian and gay students and faculty here, I have felt them rush into defensiveness which I feel gets in the way of their hearing the stories and therefore taking responsibility and moving from a place of acceptance to one of active alliance. Several colleagues have "cautioned" me against finding homophobia everywhere, telling me that not every criticism of a gay or lesbian person is an example of homophobia, that some of us deserve criticism. What I experience during these times is a dismissal of my experience and that of my students, and a profound sense of not being heard.

My being out has caused me little or no overt discrimination. What has pained me, however, is a kind of liberal tolerance which amounts to support for the status quo. Even some of my most supportive colleagues, for example, have told me that they are frightened to use lesbian or gay material in class, either because they don't know how to deal with it themselves, or they fear hostile student reactions.

While my coming out to my colleagues has been a long and evolving process, my coming out to my students is even more problematic. I have been reading and teaching Audre Lorde for years. Her message that we must break silence about those things which we need to say has affected me profoundly. I believe, as she does, that breaking silence brings strength and connection. I regularly assign *The Cancer Journals* and read Lorde's words aloud to my students:

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. . . .

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you, are you doing yours? (20-21)

When I first read those words of Lorde's, I vowed to try to live and do my work so that I could answer her question affirmatively. I redefined my work as encompassing not just my career as a professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Nebraska, but as empowering women through women's literature, always inclusive of lesbians. As part of this re-definition, I began to do more community work, writing articles about women authors, including Lorde, for the local feminist newspaper; facilitating reading groups through the YWCA; giving talks on women authors for community women; giving readings of lesbian literature to groups on and off campus.

Nonetheless, I felt hypocritical. Even after I had begun to be very open about my lesbianism to my colleagues and in the community, in my classes I was silent on this central aspect of my identity. I tried to imagine the scenario of coming out in class. I fantasized making an announcement, but became angry and resentful that I would have to make such an announcement when heterosexuals did not. Since there

seemed no equivalent of coming out for anyone else I felt unfairly burdened. But at bottom I was scared, and unhappy about the distance between my beliefs and my practices.

Now I see that, just like coming out to my colleagues, coming out to my students is not one act but many. Through the years I have brought my lesbian self and concerns into the classroom in a variety of ways. I never had a problem identifying myself as a lesbian to lesbian students. The community in Lincoln is quite small, and I regularly meet my students at lesbian events. When they are in my classes, most of them are out about their lesbianism in their journals, as I am in my responses. Also, in conference in my office I am open in talking about my own experiences as a lesbian.

My lesbian students have helped me to bring lesbian material into the classroom more overtly, through the example of their own courage. I remember one occasion not long after my own coming out, when I was still quite nervous about even using the "L-word" in class. When I was cueing up a tape of May Sarton reading I had a real struggle with myself over whether to include the introduction of the tape, in which she was identified as a lesbian. The struggle was actually physical, with me rewinding and fast-forwarding as I wrestled within myself. I was treating Sarton's lesbianism as I did my own. I knew students would like her as an author—then, if they found out later that she was a lesbian, I reasoned, they would still like her because she was the "same person." However, I was afraid that if the students knew first, they would dismiss her before they read her. Other lesbians and gays will probably recognize this scenario. But then, I pictured Jennifer's face, Jennifer sitting in our feminist circle, Jennifer who had come out to her classmates a couple weeks earlier, and I knew I had to include this part of the tape. Now, years later, as I write this, it seems quite trivial, hard to believe it was such a struggle. But it was, and I acknowledge it as part of my process as a lesbian teacher.

This semester, in a course in which I did not come out, it was another young lesbian woman, out to me but not to the class, whose courage helped me decide to use a video about Project 10, a support system for lesbian and gay students in the Los Angeles school system. I was nervous because a few students had already attacked material in the class as immoral, anti-Christian, and pornographic. Alice had spoken to me of the pain and isolation she felt as a lesbian in high school, of her suicide attempts, of her dream of someday being a counselor for lesbian and gay teenagers, of the high school teacher who "saved her life" by being supportive and helping her find a counselor. With Alice's face before me and her words in my ears, I decided to show a film in

which lesbian and gay teenagers speak of the harassment they experience in school, and in which the mother of a gay son who committed suicide states tearfully that while before "my beliefs shaped my reality, now reality shapes my beliefs."²

In recent years I have used lesbian literature regularly in my classes, and I would like to think I have helped some students become aware of, educated about, and more open to lesbians and their experiences. Students at Nebraska include a large number of people from very conservative backgrounds who think they have never met a lesbian or gay person. When I teach lesbian material, I get a fair number of journal responses which say that lesbianism is "sick," "perverted," and "immoral." I always respond in writing to these comments, and in a non-confrontive way supply stories, statistics, information, and questions that ask the student to open up to new ways of thinking. Although I'm not out to these students, I use my experiences as a lesbian to give them information that I hope will help them break through culturally reinforced stereotypes. Often this will include stories of people I know or references to other reading material.

To a student who wrote in his response to *The Cancer Journals* that homosexuality was "unnatural," that people who "chose" it were sinners, I wrote:

Many homosexuals feel that their sexual orientation is not a choice. It seems that throughout history, in different times and cultures, about 10% of the population is consistently homosexual. So it seems to some to be a natural phenomenon.

I'm glad that although you disapprove of Lorde's lifestyle, you could still read and appreciate *The Cancer Journals* and listen to what she was saying about her own experience. As I said in class the other day, the last part of the book is very important to me too, where she explicitly links the personal and the political. Most of us would like to believe that those in charge have all our best interests in mind, yet it seems that profit is put above people most of the time.

Another student wrote in her journal that she didn't condemn lesbians, but they made her uncomfortable. She added that she "just didn't understand" lesbianism, or why some women would try to be men. To her I responded:

I appreciated your openness here and in class about how hard it is to be open-minded about lesbianism when it's a new

topic for you. My belief is that literature gets us as far into other people's experience who are different from us as it's possible to get. Therefore, I use literature from all kinds of different women in this course. We don't exactly know why some women are lesbian; it seems as if throughout history about 10% of women have been. It just seems to be. Lesbians don't think they are men, or try to be men. They are women who love women. I appreciate your willingness to try to be accepting. Many people stay where they were when they first enter college, and never change their minds about anything. I find I'm always coming up against my own limitations, trying to get past them.

As I type these responses now, they seem overly careful. They may strike some of you as not challenging the students enough. The truth is I *am* careful when I encounter such resistance. I try to respond within the student's own framework. Very occasionally I get some feedback which lets me know I am sometimes successful. This summer I received a letter from a student who had a course with me three years ago. She wrote: "Although I was *extremely* homophobic at the time I took this class, those things you said and wrote in my journals somehow sunk in. I guess the actual thanks goes for your attempts to open my mind, even in the face of my hostility. Learning to accept 'those people' has come to enrich my life."

I use in-class exercises to enable us to discuss the students' feelings about lesbians and gays in a non-threatening way, but which also, hopefully, reveal hatred or fear of lesbians and gays as based on lack of information, personal experience, or thoughtfulness. For example, on the day we discussed "The Two" from Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place*, I asked the students to do a five-minute anonymous free-write responding to the question, "How would Lorraine and Theresa be treated in your hometown, the neighborhood you grew up in, your dorm, your sorority, or the neighborhood in which you now live?"³ After we were done writing, I had one student collect the responses, shuffle them, and hand them out again randomly. Then I asked students to volunteer to read aloud the ones they had. There were many powerful, real-life stories of teachers "run out" of small towns, women forced to leave sororities, women shunned on dorm floors, as well as lesbian couples accepted as nurturing "aunts" in a neighborhood. I think the fact that, contrary to what they claimed, many students had knowledge of harassment against lesbians made a strong impression.

In another case when we were reading love poems by Amy Lowell

to Ada Russell, I asked the students to address in small groups the question of whether, if they were editors of an anthology of "100 Great Love Poems," they would include these poems and, if so, whether they would include information which indicated that they were written by a woman for a woman. When they received the exercise in class, many students reacted in shock, saying they hadn't realized that these poems were written by a lesbian to her lover (even though the introduction in our anthology, which I had asked them to read, stated this clearly). Most students said that this information was necessary and should be included in any anthology, yet during the discussion at least half the students denied that these were lesbian love poems. Several had elaborate readings of the poems which turned the speaker into a male addressing a female lover (although when questioned they could give no support from the poems except that in one of the poems the speaker has "come home from work" and the lover has been home sewing). Two Catholic students read Lowell's poem "Madonna of the Evening Flowers" as a tribute to the Blessed Virgin Mary (although they could not explain why Mary was in the speaker's garden telling her that the peonies needed spraying). And one student declared that he simply "forgot" that this was a women's literature course and assumed that the author of the poems was male. I hope this exercise helped students see how easy it is to erase lesbians. Several weeks later, when some students were complaining that Audre Lorde didn't have to repeat over and over again that she was a lesbian in *The Cancer Journals*—that they "got it" the first time—I reminded them of what had happened during our discussion of Lowell.

Still, I had not, in all this time, come out in class. Why? I was, by this time, tenured, with a reputation as a good teacher (I had, in fact, received a Distinguished Teaching Award). When I thought about it, it seemed I had little to risk. But I was afraid of the responses of my students. I didn't want to "lose them," I said to myself and to friends. As I have said, I work with many students with little exposure to "out" lesbians or to lesbian issues. Even when I'm "in the closet," my use of lesbian literature is too much for some of them. One student in a sophomore level Twentieth-Century Women Writers class wrote on her evaluation: "Awareness of the feminist movement was what stuck in my mind, however I thought the course was heavily biased toward lesbian women writers. I didn't like having that pushed at me all the time." A student in another section of the same course wrote: "I do not think it is appropriate for anyone to read about lesbians and their habits. . . . I realize this is the 90s but there are some of us who still value decency, purity, chastity, and Christianity. . . . As far as [the teacher's]

choice of materials and her own personal convictions, I am violently opposed. Her hero is Audre Lorde—big time lesbian. I find that a problem.”

Yet I don’t think that it is really fear of these students or fear of “losing them” that has kept me from coming out in these classes. I think it’s something deeper. I want my students to like me, and I’m afraid that they won’t if they know I’m a lesbian. This is internalized homophobia, but in spite of being able to name it and analyze it, I haven’t routed it yet. Suzanne Pharr points out that when a lesbian passes as heterosexual by hiding her lesbianism she demonstrates a belief that others’ acceptance of her is conditional—she believes they would reject her if they knew she was a lesbian. This, then, is the dynamic I set up with my students. As Pharr states, in this situation the lesbian can never truly believe in others’ approval (73). What has resulted for me has been the increasing gut discomfort I described earlier.

In the spring of 1990 I taught Audre Lorde’s *Zami* in a senior-graduate level Twentieth-Century Women Novelists course. I knew that not many students would have previously read anything by a lesbian in which the author makes the personal and political implications of her lesbianism one of the most important aspects of her book. From past experience I also knew that the responses to this book would be powerful, that most students would respond to Lorde’s honesty and the poetry of her writing with strong emotion. Therefore, I decided to use a round-robin technique in class that night, a technique I use sparingly but have found very effective with emotional or controversial material. I had a student distribute a number to each person in the class. My only instructions were that we talk in turn, that when each person had the floor she could talk as long as she wanted, signaling when she was done by calling the next number, and that no one could interrupt for any reason—we would hold all comments and questions until the end, after everyone had a chance to speak.

I had manipulated things somewhat by grabbing a number somewhere in the middle of the pile, as I did not want to be either first or last. The first student, a heterosexual student I knew well from a previous class and was out to, startled me—she panicked and could not speak. But another student quickly traded numbers with her and, without comment, read the beginning of the very sensuous Prologue of *Zami*:

I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest parts of my mother and father within /into me—to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks.

I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered—to leave and be left—to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving. I would like to drive forward and at other times to rest or be driven. When I sit and play in the waters of my bath I love to feel the deep inside parts of me, sliding and folded and tender and deep. Other times I like to fantasize the core of it, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable in a different way. (7)

It was a breathtaking beginning. As the responses continued, I thought that maybe I would come out. A number of women said they had been uncomfortable reading the book when they found out that Lorde was a lesbian, but that they came to appreciate her directness. “I found out that lesbians are people too and their relationships are just like anyone else’s” was repeated two or three times. This is a beginning, but I hoped for a much more complex response. I want students to know that it’s not the same—that because a lesbian can’t hold her lover’s hand as she walks down the street, because a lesbian’s family might disinherit her because her lover is a woman, because a lesbian is afraid her classmates will likely taunt and harass her when they find out—being a lesbian in the twentieth-century U.S. is different than being a heterosexual. I wanted them to know much more too, about how being a lesbian is “nothing so simple and dismissible as the fact that two women might go to bed together. It was a sense of desiring oneself; above all, of choosing oneself; it was also a primary intensity between women . . .” (Rich, 200). But when I thought of coming out, I got so nervous that I couldn’t hear what anyone else was saying; I knew that if I kept thinking about it that I literally would not even be able to speak when my turn came. So I steadfastly did not think about it.

“Number 21.” The student’s voice rang out clearly. It was my turn.

“*Zami* is important to me because of what it says about connection among women. It begins and ends with connection, and throughout Lorde acknowledges that she has become who she is because of the love and support of other women. This book is also important to me because I am a lesbian.” My heart was beating loudly and my voice shook as I said this. I gazed out into the class, but did not focus my eyes to meet those of the students sitting in a circle around me.

“Number 22,” I said, calling on the next student.

I did not hear the next student’s response to *Zami*. My heart was still pounding and my hands were shaking as I tried to continue to

take notes casually, as I had been doing throughout the exercise. I had just come out in class for the first time.

My first response was one of elation. Students responded warmly and supportively. After class, two lesbian students came up and said, "Thank you." A heterosexual graduate student said, "I wrote this in my journal, but I also wanted to tell you that I think you are brave and I really appreciated what you did." A heterosexual undergraduate with whom I've worked before but hadn't been out to handed me a note in pencil on a half-sheet of notebook paper—"Dear Barbara, You are wonderful. I want to grow up to be just like you." Another lesbian student gave me a "Lesbian of the Year" card from *Lesbian Connection*.

Disappointingly for me, however, there seemed to be no real follow-up. In the round-robin that night in class, before we got to me, several students had responded to *Zami* by saying that they didn't know any lesbians, but they hoped someday a lesbian friend would trust them enough to come out to them. I was hoping, I guess, to be that person for some of them. I was hoping that heterosexuals who had questions or needed information might ask me for it. But after that night and a couple journal entries which came in the next week, there seemed to be no further ripples from what was, for me, a very momentous event.

Still, as I write this, I know that there were ripples—some which I experienced, some which I did not. I remember, for example, sharing personal experience in my responses to the journal entries on *Zami*. Perhaps I have begun to be an "I-witness" for some of my heterosexual students. I was heartened when, on the last night of class, at a party at my house, one student performed "Church Lady," a parody of a talk show hosted by an evangelical type. In calling various people in the class to task for feminist doings (leaving their children and husbands home alone to come talk about women's literature, for example), she called me to task for my lesbianism. Her skit was very funny, and I felt good that my identity as a lesbian was so much a part of the class for her that she could joke about it. Another student, who runs a film theater, gave me a poster from the popular lesbian film "Desert Hearts."

Still, of my three classes that semester, all women's literature classes, I came out only in this one. The others felt too risky; I was afraid. My coming out is a process, never finished, always evolving. In my work as a lesbian teacher I will continue to fight my own fears of others' judgment and rejection of me, remembering Audre Lorde's words: "[T]hat visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength" (*Cancer Journals*, 22).

Afterword: It has been four years since I first wrote this essay. I came out as a lesbian to a sophomore-level class for the first time the semester after I wrote it, in circumstances much like those detailed here, while we were discussing *Zami*. The very next semester, I came out to all my classes in a letter at the beginning of the semester. Initially, being out from the start was a real liberation for me; in addition, I felt that having my lesbianism as a given affected the classes positively in ways I couldn't begin to know about during the semester. However, in the years since, when I've been out to every class I've taught the first week of classes, my being out has complicated things far more than I anticipated. Unexpectedly, when we got to the Amy Lowell poems and my editing exercise, I felt more constrained than before. I began to worry that anything I said would be taken as "special pleading," that the students would perceive me as teaching this literature for personal reasons only. In subsequent semesters, these feelings have abated a bit, but I find the whole process of being out with my students much more complex than I originally expected it to be.

Regardless, I know that writing this essay was a crucial part of my finally being able to be fully out in the classroom—a tribute to the power of writing and of visibility.

¹In 1994, this is no longer the case, although examples are still few.

²Information about the video "Who's Afraid of Project 10?" can be obtained from the founder and director of the project, Virginia Uribe, Fairfax High School, 7850 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90046. I recommend it highly for use with high school and college classes or with teachers and counselors.

³My colleague and running partner George Wolf devised this imaginative and successful exercise. We refined it on many runs together.

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